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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000477

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [EG](#)  
SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN CONVERT STRUGGLES FOR ACCEPTANCE

REF: 08 CAIRO 256

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs  
William R. Stewart for Reasons 1.4 (d)

1.(C) KEY POINTS

--(C) On March 16, we met with Maher El Gohary and his attorney, Nabil Ghobreal. El Gohary, who converted from Islam to Christianity 34 years ago, filed a lawsuit in August 2008 to compel the GoE to issue him an identity document listing his religion as Christianity (Note: All Egyptian identity documents must identify the holder as Muslim, Christian or Jewish.)

--(C) According to El Gohary, since filing the lawsuit, his Moslem relatives and even strangers have threatened him, especially in court, where a group of Islamist lawyers regularly appears to intimidate El Gohary and demand the judge charge him with "apostasy," a crime that does not exist in Egyptian law.

--(C) Because of the threatening courtroom atmosphere, in late February, El Gohary applied at a GoE civil registry office for a power-of-attorney authorizing lawyer Ghobreal to act on his behalf at subsequent hearings without El Gohary personally appearing. El Gohary said the GoE registry employee with whom he dealt verbally abused him, incited other patrons to also verbally, and even physically, abuse him, causing him to leave without obtaining the document.

--(C) Because El Gohary was unable to obtain a power of attorney, he is required to appear at the next hearing in his case, scheduled for March 28. Ghobreal will meet with the judge before the hearing to discuss courtroom security arrangements.

--(C) As to the substance of the case, Ghobreal said there are a number of procedural problems with the case, including his failure to initially introduce evidence that the GoE denied El Gohary an identification document reflecting his conversion.

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COMMENT  
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2.(C) El Gohary's reports of intimidation by Islamist lawyers during court sessions are consistent with what we witnessed during other cases dealing with sensitive religious topics, including the Baha'i community's efforts to obtain identification documents. His experience at the registry office and his mistreatment by a low-level GoE functionary is also consistent with a growing trend towards greater Islamic influence and increasing intolerance in Egypt's bureaucracy

3.(C) Religious conversion is seen by many Egyptians as more than a personal spiritual decision, but as an affront to

family and society. Nonetheless, some observers see limited signs of hope in El Gohary's difficult, and possibly dangerous, quest for GoE acceptance of his conversion. Yousef Sidholm, a prominent Coptic intellectual and publisher, told us that ten years ago, it would have been "inconceivable" that a case such as El Gohary's could have been filed. Today, people are willing to at least discuss conversion and other sensitive religious issues. For example, El Gohary appeared on a popular television news show last summer to debate religious conversion with an Islamist lawyer.

5.(C) As for El Gohary's legal prospects, while Egyptian law permits a convert to obtain a new identification document, for a government that feels pressure to appear as respectful of Islam as Egypt's Islamist opposition, correctly applying the law would no doubt be a difficult decision. Unfortunately for El Gohary, his lawyer appears to have committed procedural mistakes that may make it easy for the court to rule against him on technicalities. According to human rights lawyers, Ghobreal is inexperienced, is representing El Gohary at no charge in hopes of generating publicity for his practice, and does not have the temperament to handle so public and contentious a case. We witnessed Ghobreal's temper when he entered the Embassy to meet with us and created a scene by refusing to walk through a metal detector or consent to a search.

6.(C) On March 17, we discussed U.S. interest in the case with Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for Human Rights Wael Aboulmagd and will continue to raise the case with our GoE interlocutors.

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El Gohary's Struggle  
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7.(C) El Gohary told us that after years of living as a Christian, and facing discrimination from both his family and society, he was encouraged by fellow convert Mohamed Hegazy's unsuccessful lawsuit - now under appeal - seeking GoE recognition of his conversion (ref A), to file his own lawsuit. El Gohary said that because of his conversion, he faced discrimination and estrangement from his family, but is nevertheless surprised by the degree of hostility his legal case engendered. He now lives in a Coptic monastery for safety.

8.(C) According to El Gohary, at each court hearing, he is verbally assaulted by a group of Islamist lawyers. The group was particularly aggressive at a late February hearing and demanded the judge charge El Gohary with apostasy, a crime that does not exist in Egyptian law, and sentence him to death. El Gohary said their conduct, along with repeated death threats he receives over the telephone, convinced him that it was no longer safe to appear in court. He therefore went to a GoE civil registry office to obtain a document that would give his attorney authority to represent El Gohary in court, even if El Gohary was not personally present. According to El Gohary, after he explained his request to a GoE registry office employee, the employee shouted that it was "impossible to leave Islam." Other registry office patrons, attracted by the shouting, also verbally abused El Gohary; he told us that some shoved him, and someone he thinks was an office "tea boy" hit him with a broom stick. Feeling threatened, El Gohary left the office without obtaining the power-of-attorney.

9.(C) Lacking the power-of-attorney, El Gohary is required to appear at the next hearing in the case, scheduled for March 28. According to Ghobreal, the judge previously guaranteed El Gohary's safety in the courtroom. Ghobreal says the judge's pledge is consistent with the professional approach the judge and the two GoE lawyer's representing the

government have taken. Ghobreal contrasted their behavior with the "mob" of Islamist lawyers, who are not parties to the case, and whom the judge is unable or unwilling to control.

10.(C) Ghobreal told us that there are at least two procedural problems with El Gohary's case. First, Ghobreal failed initially to introduce evidence that the GoE formally rejected El Gohary's request for a new identification document reflecting his conversion. Ghobreal recently filed a second lawsuit - including such evidence - which he hopes will cure the defect. Additionally, El Gohary has heretofore failed to present documentary evidence of his conversion. El Gohary told us he has been unable to obtain a certificate of conversion from an Egyptian church, but intends to introduce a baptism certificate he obtained many years ago in Cyprus. Other human rights lawyers we spoke with expressed concern at what they see as basic legal errors, which may enable the judge to rule against El Gohary on a technicality without addressing the merits of the case.

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